



The Effectiveness of Authoritarian Reform: The Case of Russian Commercial Courts

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Context and Data

Results

Mechanisms

Discussion



Context and Data

Authoritarian Reform and the Judiciary

- Authoritarian rulers balance centralization and legitimacy (Przeworski, 1991; Svoboda, 2012).
- Judicial reforms serve as instruments of control (Moustafa, 2014; Sievert, 2018).
- 2014 Russian reform: Abolition of High Arbitrazh Court
 - Part of series of authoritarian reforms – often with uneven consequences (Reuter & Robertson, 2012; Robertson, 2013).



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- Potential impacts on lower-level arbitrazh court judges' deference

Russian Judicial Reform

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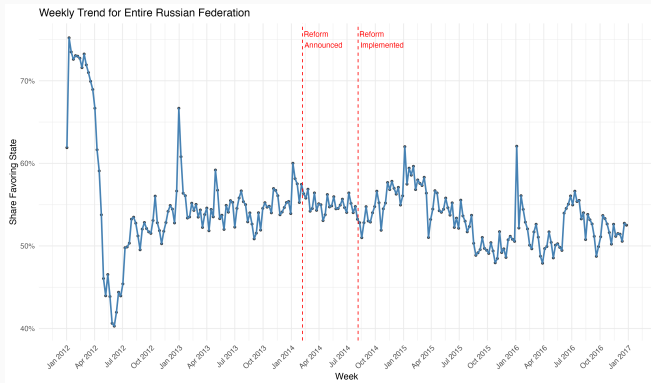


Figure 1: Timeline of 2014 Court Reform

- (H1) The reform shocked judges into ruling more often for the state
- Stronger effects where state is electorally consolidated (H2a) and weaker where local political culture favors opposition (H2b)
- Heterogeneity by judge background: security ties (H3a), local roots (H3b), and corruption (H3c)

- 1.7M first-instance commercial court decisions (2012–2016) in 81 regions
- Code claimants as state or private (GPT-augmented dictionary search) and construct outcome indicator.
- Construct corruption indicator as ratio of owned property value to household income from earliest available declaration.
- Event study design with region-month fixed effects
- Controls: array of case type, judge (from official biographies), and regional covariates



Results

Main Effect: Backlash to Reform

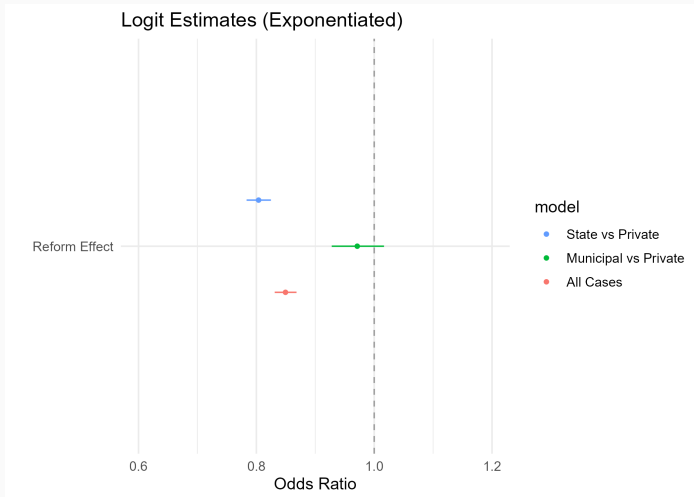


Figure 2: Event-study estimates: change in pro-state decisions

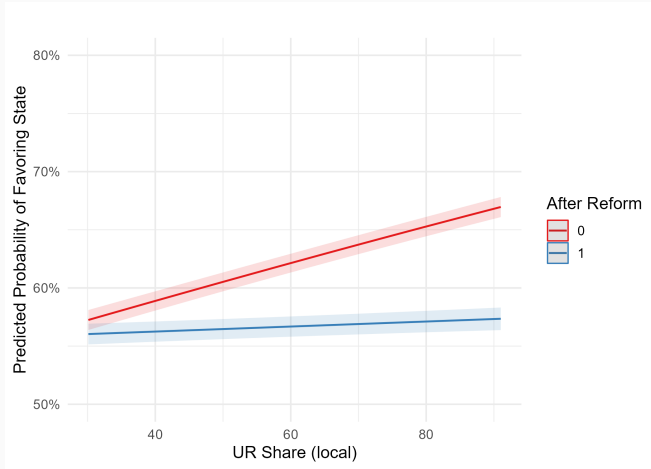


Figure 3: Reform Effect by Regional Party Strength (H2a)

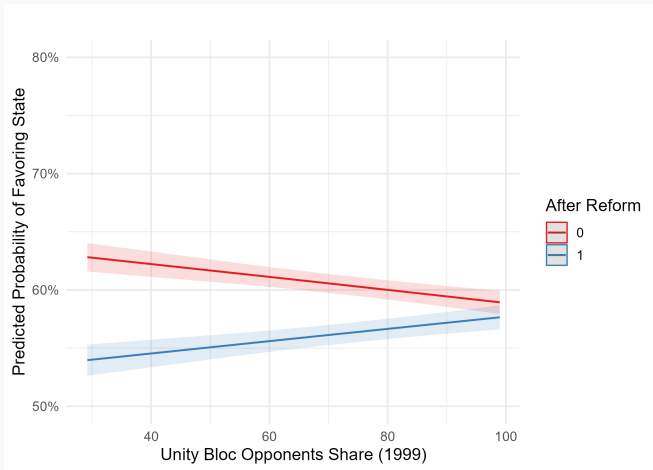


Figure 4



Mechanisms

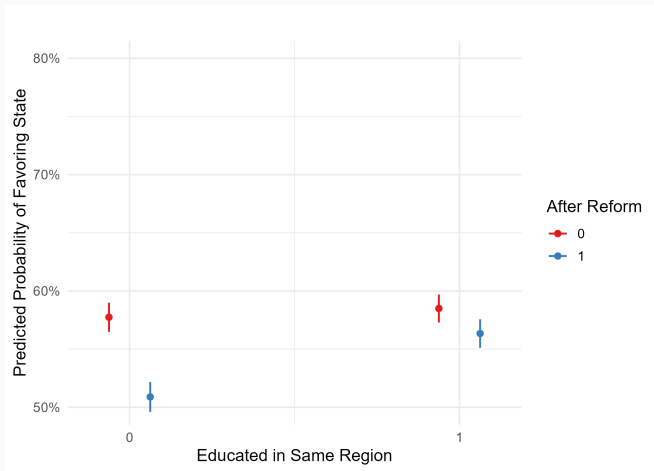


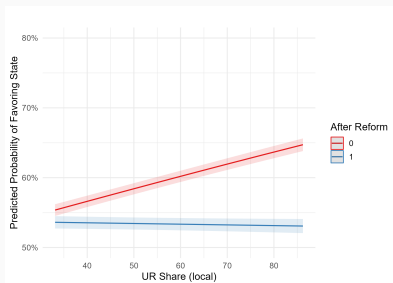
Figure 5: Reform Effect by education region (H3a)



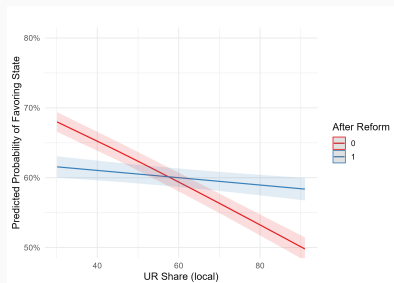
Figure 6: Reform Effect by corruption probability (H3c)

Professional Norms or Election Interference?

- Electoral returns carry different meanings in Ethnic vs. Russian regions:
 - Manipulation
 - Clientelism



(a) Russian Regions



(b) Ethnic Regions

Figure 7: Regime-strength effects in Russian vs. Ethnic regions (UR Local Shares).



Discussion

- Centralizing reform appears to have backfired, reducing instead of increasing state-favoring rulings
- Loyalist judges drove backlash, consistent with other findings on indiscriminate repression.
- Implications for authoritarian institutional design

- Longer-term effects on legal precedent and litigant behavior
- Incorporate general jurisdiction courts as control series
- Examine role of judges' place in informal professional networks



Thank you!

Please send comments and questions by email to [pj504@nyu.edu](mailto:pjc504@nyu.edu)